

## News Media Critique: “Crazies in the Streets”

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Media representations of mental illness are powerful and often override people's own personal experiences in relation to how they view mental illness. Unfortunately, media representations of mental illness are often inaccurate and fraught with stigmatizing attitudes. Drawing from a Canadian example, media coverage of a domestic violence killing and the killing of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer by a man with schizophrenia is compared. It is clear that the media has stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness. These inaccurate portrayals influence the generation of public opinion regarding how a person with disability should be treated and our views of how disability should be managed. As consumers of news media we must be aware of the messages contained within the articles and recognize oppressive, prejudicial, and discriminatory content that perpetuates stereotypes and disabilities.

*Keywords:* Mental illness; Stigma; Media; Disability.

### Introduction

On February 28, 2004 James Galloway was shot and killed by Marty Ostopovich. On February 27, 2004 Darcy Doyle shot and killed Richard Ratcliff and shot Nicolette Doyle severely injuring her. Darcy Doyle then killed himself. Marty Ostopovich died in hospital after being shot by police. Both of these incidents raised questions about gun control. Both men had a history of violence. Both men had a history of uttering threats and unpredictability. Both men had a history of weapons offences.

Darcy Doyle tried to kill his estranged wife and successfully killed her new boyfriend. This is not uncommon. In 2001, there were a total of 554 homicides in Canada ([Statistics Canada, 2002](#)). Eighty-eight percent of the victims knew their killer ([Statistics Canada, 2002](#)). Of these homicides women made up 29% of the victims ([Status of Women Canada, 2003](#)), and of these 52% of the victims were killed by a spouse or a boyfriend ([Status of Women Canada, 2003](#)). Using ProQuest to search the Canadian Newsstand Database for articles published between March 1, 2004 and

March 15, 2004 containing the search terms “Doyle” and “shooting of wife” 6 articles were found. These articles were printed in 4 different CanWest Global Communications Corporation (CanWest) Canadian newspapers. These papers were: Calgary Herald (located in Calgary, Alberta), Edmonton Journal (located in Edmonton, Alberta), National Post (located in Don Mills, Ontario) and The Province (located in Vancouver, British Columbia) newspapers (see [Appendix](#)). It should be noted that three of the six articles merely mentioned this tragedy and then focused on the Ostopovich/Galloway story. “Facts” of the Ostopovich/Galloway shootings were found in 105 articles using ProQuest to search for articles containing the term “Ostopovich” and were published between March 1, 2004 and March 15, 2004. These articles were published in 35 different newspapers spanning from the west coast of Canada (Vancouver, British Columbia) to the east coast of Canada (St. John's, Newfoundland). CanWest owns 11 of the 35 papers. These 11 newspapers have a print circulation of 1,416,354 copies (D. Boutin, personal communication, June 2, 2004). This story was available for Canadians from coast to coast.

Why did this tragedy get so much more press coverage than the Doyle shootings? Could it be that James Galloway was a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer, or that Marty Ostopovich had a mental illness, or maybe because Galloway and Ostopovich

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did not know each other and according to [Statistics Canada \(2002\)](#), only 13% of homicide victims do not know their killer, so this crime is less common than the Doyle shootings? No reporter mentioned that the circumstances surrounding Cpl. Galloway's and Ostopovich's deaths occur less frequently than the deaths of women at the hands of an intimate partner. What was mentioned in all of the articles was that Marty Ostopovich had a mental illness. In fact, most of the content of these articles focused on Ostopovich having a mental illness. Usually the information about James Galloway was limited to a line or two. Many articles used generic labels for Marty Ostopovich. Six of the articles referred to him as a schizophrenic, that kind of person, mentally ill ([Barrett, Cormier, & Loyie, 2004](#); [Barrett & Sadava, 2004](#); [Brooymans, 2004a, 2004b](#); [Cormier, 2004](#); [Loyie & Baxter, 2004](#)). Three articles indicated that he had a brain injury or was brain damaged ([Barrett, Cormier, et al., 2004](#); [Loyie & Baxter, 2004](#)). Common stereotypes about mental illness were also perpetuated. Writers suggested he was a product of an abusive childhood ([Brooymans, 2004b](#); [Patrick, 2004a, 2004b](#)). All writers used at least one of the following phrases: crazies in the streets, he suffered from it, he was tormented, he was tortured, he was haunted, he was unpredictable, he was uncontrollable because of it, he was dangerous, he would blow his head gasket, he was unstable, he was off the wall, a monster, a schizophrenic with a fondness for guns, or he had criminal tendencies. Contrary to the dangerousness portrayed in these articles 95-97% of violent crimes are committed by those without a mental illness ([Monahan, 1996](#)). All but 3 of the articles sensationalized or stereotyped his experience with mental illness ([Ennis, 2004](#); [LaJeunesse, 2004](#); [Ruttan & Mah, 2004](#)).

[Barrett, Sadava, and Loyie \(2004\)](#) refer to the Galloway shooting as a tragedy but there is no mention that the death of Ostopovich was also a loss. The articles typically presented information in such a way to emphasize Ostopovich's culpability in the shooting. For example, "he stopped taking his drugs". When a disability is thought to be culpable, this belief can lead to stigmatization and prejudice towards the individuals experiencing the disability. If decision makers view people with a mental illness as culpable and dangerous they have negative attitudes towards people with mental illness which consequently effects resource allocation decisions. When people are deemed "unworthy" rationing of resources occurs when decisions are based on the principles of distributive and social justice ([Burris, 2002](#); [Corley & Goren, 1998](#)). Typically, such decisions will result in government policies and legislation looking more toward containment and control rather than toward recovery and community living ([Edney, 2004](#)). In other words, negative media cover-

age generates stigma and prejudice thus impeding further recovery, triggers discrimination and oppression, and creates barriers to seeking and finding decent housing, employment, and education ([Wahl, 1999](#)).

Mental illness is relatively common. Seventeen percent of the population in Alberta were treated for mental health problems in 2002-2003 ([Ruttan & Mah, 2004](#)). Despite the banality of mental illness, [Philo \(1996\)](#) found that media representations of mental illness are so powerful that they override people's own personal experiences in relation to how they view mental illness. Unfortunately, as shown in this small sample of articles, most of the media representations were inaccurate. These inaccurate portrayals influence the generation of public opinion regarding how a person with disability should be treated and our views of how disability should be managed. As consumers of news media we must be aware of the messages contained within the articles and recognize oppressive, prejudicial, and discriminatory content that perpetuates stereotypes and disabilities.

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## Appendix

### Publishing Newspapers

|                                     | Newspaper                    | Canadian Location Published |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Doyle Articles</b>               | Calgary Herald (CanWest)     | Calgary, AB                 |
|                                     | Edmonton Journal (CanWest)   | Edmonton, AB                |
|                                     | National Post (CanWest)      | Don Mills, ON               |
|                                     | The Province (CanWest)       | Vancouver, BC               |
| <b>Ostapovich/Galloway Articles</b> | Alaska Highway news          | Fort St. John, BC           |
|                                     | Calgary Herald (CanWest)     | Calgary, AB                 |
|                                     | Cape Breton Post             | Cape Breton, NS             |
|                                     | Daily News                   | Truro/Halifax, NS           |
|                                     | Daily Press                  | Timmins, ON                 |
|                                     | Edmonton Journal (CanWest)   | Edmonton, AB                |
|                                     | Examiner                     | Barrie, ON                  |
|                                     | Expositor                    | Brantford, ON               |
|                                     | Guardian                     | Charlottetown, PEI          |
|                                     | Leader Post (CanWest)        | Regina, SK                  |
|                                     | Moose Jaw Times Herald       | Moose Jaw, SK               |
|                                     | Nanaimo Daily News           | Nelson, BC                  |
|                                     | North Bay Nugget             | North Bay, ON               |
|                                     | Ottawa Citizen (CanWest)     | Ottawa, ON                  |
|                                     | Packet and Times             | Orillia, ON                 |
|                                     | Peace River Block Daily News | Pembroke, ON                |
|                                     | Pembroke Observer            | Pembroke, ON                |
|                                     | Peterborough Examiner        | Peterborough, ON            |
|                                     | Pioneer Journal              | Summerside, PEI             |
|                                     | Prince Albert Daily Herald   | Prince Albert, SK           |
|                                     | Prince George Citizen        | Prince George, BC           |
|                                     | Sault Star                   | Sault Ste. Marie, ON        |
|                                     | Standard                     | St. Catharines, ON          |
|                                     | Star – Phoenix (Can West)    | Saskatoon, SK               |
|                                     | Sudbury Star                 | Sudbury, ON                 |

|  | <b>Newspaper</b>            | <b>Canadian Location Published</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Ostopovich/Galloway Articles</b><br><br><b>(Cont'd)</b> | The Gazette                 | Montréal, QC                       |
|  | The Province (CanWest)      | Vancouver, BC                      |
|  | The Telegram                | St. John's, NF                     |
|  | The Vancouver Sun (CanWest) | Vancouver, BC                      |
|  | The Windsor Star (CanWest)  | Windsor, ON                        |
|  | Times-Colonist (CanWest)    | Victoria, BC                       |
|  | Western Star                | Corner Brook, NF                   |
|  | Whitehorse Star             | Whitehorse, YK                     |

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